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Fourth and Fifth Grade Reflection

I’ve always considered the transition between fourth and fifth grade a pivotal time in my early education. After attending a private Catholic school for 5 years, entering fifth grade as a new student in a public school was intimidating and surreal.

My initial years in school were spent in a dark, dreary brick structure on a large, bare, concrete lot. The aging building was positioned beside a church and surrounded by a rusting wire fence. Despite its outward appearances, I have many fond memories of playing on that lot, and the track and field ribbons I’ve kept for over two decades serve as a pleasant reminder. The teachers were strict, but warm, and fostered a familial environment within a group of well behaved children who had known each other since kindergarten. Although the curriculum was largely dominated by religion, the teachers were cognizant of those with greater capabilities or opportunities and ensured they received adequate attention and resources. I was in always the first girl picked during gym, had a great deal of friends, and because my mother declined to advance me to the next grade prematurely, was taught independently of my class. As a nine year old, my confidence and level of contentedness was high; it would be tested as I left the comfort of fourth grade to enter the unknowns of fifth grade in the public school system.

For the first few months in my new school, I felt as if it was my first day, every day. I could not shake the dream-like sensation as I walked into the lunchroom or the schoolyard; it was as if I was at summer camp and not school. If the novelty wasn’t jarring enough, the colorful, fluorescent, overall environment was a stark contrast to the comforting darkness I’d been accustomed to. The teachers seemed lax, and the students, unruly. Although I made a few friends, for the first time, I was picked last during gym. What the curriculum lacked in religious education, it more than made up for with alternate coursework. I was a fish out of water, and I was floundering.

Intimidated by the new expectations, I avoided completing my own work, opting to help others with their work instead. At the beginning of the fourth quarter, my teacher called me and my father in for a conference. She explained to my father that I had not been completing my work, and that my grades of A+ throughout the year were based on ability and potential, not production. She stressed that she would no longer accommodate me in the final quarter, and that it was up to me whether or not I earned my final grade. She held me accountable, while bolstering my confidence and preserving my self -worth. To this day, she is one of my favorite and most memorable teachers.

My experiences, though critical to me, seem irrelevant, almost frivolous, in comparison to the experiences of the children from Chicago that Kozol describes *Savage Inequalities.* I had teachers who believed in me and invested in me. I had art, music, new books, and abundant supplies. The students of *Savage Inequalities* had teachers who slept and watched TV during class, that is, if they showed up at all. They lacked basic necessities: toilet paper, crayons, and books. The contrast, and injustice, is overwhelming and devastating.

During my fifth grade year, there were stacks of our old books in the back of the classroom. While the teacher was distracted, a small group of students gathered around the old books and began to systematically deface the inside cover of each book, one by one. When the teacher discovered what they had done, she reacted with emotion I had never before witnessed from an educator. “I can’t believe this! How could you? These books were supposed to go to Oldham School so that other boys and girls could use them! What are we going to do now? We have to fix this!” I recall thinking that she must have been very angry, yet I remember seeing the tears in her eyes. At the time, I could not comprehend the magnitude of her distress. Now, I understand.